13th Documentary Review

Name

Institutional Affiliation

Ava DuVernay’s powerful, infuriating and sometimes overwhelming documentary, 13th, gives a picture of the current day mass incarceration of the black Americans and traces the origin of this situation to the thirteenth constitution amendment that abolished slavery, slave trade and involuntary servitude. The film starts with the analysis of this amendment that stated, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted*, shall exist within the United States “ and then spends the rest of the screen time tracing the route between the italicized clause to the 2.2 million prisoners in the United States today. Throughout the film, there is a single word that keeps on flashing in huge white letters on a black background: CRIMINAL and it states that after the abolishment of the slavery the massive number of blacks were imprisoned unlawfully and due to minor crimes so as to provide labor aimed at rebuilding the economy of the U.S after the civil war.

The amendment’s exception stated that one may be engaged in an involuntary servitude if he or she was being punished for a crime committed. Due to this exception, according to Duvernay and other speakers, the systematic criminalization of the black people came about. As the documentary clearly depicts, this exception justifies the use of forced labor for as long as the laborer is a convict. From the documentary, one can deduce that the inclusion of this exception in the amendment created a loophole that most states use in the punishment of the prisoners. The loophole forms one of the justifications for the continued domination of the black people, in other words, the people of color. The documentary shows the successful and successive measures that the political authorities have used over the last three decades in disempowering the people of color in the United States.

The film is like a journey from slavery times to the current times where slavery is not out-rightly spoken about but still in existence. Through the use of pictures from magazines and newspapers as well as movie clips to depict the things that the black Americans went through in the earlier times she effectively shows the struggles that African American people go through in their day to day lives in the United States of America. The film also depicts the struggle of the blacks through the efforts of the civil rights movements to release themselves from the yoke of oppression that they got from the whites. The civil rights movements as depicted in the film were however taken to be the orchestrators of criminal activities.

The final act of the film mainly shows the state of things in the current day America. The whole film is a virtual tour through the vice of racism in the United States. The current day United States forms only 5% of the world population but has 25% of the world prisoners. Most of those that form the 25% of prisoners in the world are blacks and those from mixed races. Today, the prison industrial complex is just an advanced version of the same old problem; racism and slavery. At the end of the film, Ava Duvernay makes a case as she says that in order to have a sensible impact, making small changes would not do much but rather a entire rebuilding of the system would. She declares that at the current moment, the lives of the black people, their breaths and dignity matters just like that of anyone else in the United States

Just like Ms. Alexander implies that slavery was abolished for everyone else except for criminals, I agree with this statement. From the film I deduced that through the application of the amendment, the law and order allowed the state to imprison the blacks and not only that, it also gave rights to affect hard labor upon them without any limitation. In the prison today, hard labor is one of the punishments that black Americans are given while in incarceration. The white prisoners in contrast to their colored counterparts are given easier tasks to handle such cleaning the utensils, cooking and laundry. The black convicts are given duties such as cultivating farms, masonry work, and woodwork among other such tasks that are not only tiring but extremely exhausting.

A lot in the film questions the definition of things and in this I agree with Ava Duvernay as she depicts that when some words are mentioned, a particular character comes in the mind. When the word “criminal” is mentioned, in the minds of many, a picture of a black person comes up. There is a notion in not only the systems but also in the minds of individual whites that all black people are either criminals or can commit a crime at any point in time. At times the notion is not a person’s making but it is one that has been passed on by other people. Just like Duvernal clearly says, it is true that some of these notions are formed by another person or a set of people, for their own benefit or political gains and then handed down from one generation to the next. Today, even white teenagers avoid teenage blacks, not because of anything they have done but out of a notion they heard at home or from their parents.

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